

NEW INFORMATION ON *PSEUDECHIS PAPUANUS* (THE PAPUAN BLACK SNAKE), A MEDICALLY SIGNIFICANT ADDITION TO AUSTRALIA'S REPTILES.

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Pseudechis papuanus Peters & Doria, 1879 (the Papuan Black Snake) is known from "... along the south coast of New Guinea, from Prince Frederik Hendrik Island in Irian Jaya, the Western Province (TransFly and Lake Murray), and the coast of the Central Province and Yule Island" (Parker, 1982). It is rare in Papua New Guinea (Whitaker et al., 1982; O'Shea, 1996), and it has been suggested by Parker (1982), Whitaker et al. (1982) and O'Shea (1996) that its apparent rarity may be attributed to attempted predation on *Bufo marinus* (the introduced Cane or Marine Toad), although these reports are not based on field studies of *P. papuanus*. Published data on its feeding habits differ slightly. Whitaker et al. (1982) regard *P. papuanus* as a frog eater, while O'Shea (1996) states it feeds "primarily on frogs, but also small mammals, lizards and possibly ground nesting birds".

P. papuanus has a potent venom and is a potentially dangerous snake to humans (Campbell, 1967a, 1967b; Parker, 1982; Whitaker, et al., 1982; and O'Shea, 1996). Campbell & Chesterman (1972) examined the action of its venom and showed it to be 'anticoagulant, fibrinogenolytic and caseinolytic'. Parker (1982) reported that *P. papuanus* caused many fatalities in southern coastal Papua New Guinea and O'Shea (1996) regards it as 'the second most venomous land snake in PNG after the taipan'.

In October 1996, E. Vanderduys, A. McManus and I were conducting a reptile survey of the Torres Strait islands. Mr Manual Namoa, Acting Principal of the Saibai Island State School, gave me a snake which had been killed in the local school grounds. It had been held for some time in preservative and no date of collection was recorded.

The snake has been photographed (Fig 1.) and added to the Queensland Museum reference collection (QMJ62555). In the following standard identification characteristics, QMJ62555 from Saibai Island (9°23'S, 142°40'E) is readily referred to *P. papuanus* as defined by Golay (1985) and O'Shea (1996): Midbody scales 19; Ventral scales 221; Subcaudal scales 51, anterior 26 entire. The specimen (in spirit) is immaculate black above and dark grey below, with a pink ventral flush on the chin, posterior body and tail. It is a female with a total length of 158 cm and a tail length of 21 cm. The gut contained 3 spirurid nematodes (*Physaloptera* sp.) but no prey items.

Saibai Is. is only 4 km south of the Papua New Guinea coast. It is thus geographically New Guinean but, politically Australian. It is low-lying and mangrove-fringed with pockets of monsoon forest. Its most conspicuous topographic feature is an extensive mosaic of freshwater and saline swamps. Parker (1982) and O'Shea (1996) note that *P. papuanus* has a preference for swampy areas and its occurrence on Saibai Is. is consistent with their observations. A large freshwater swamp lies only about 100 metres from the school and during the 'wet season' it undoubtedly expands to be very close to the school grounds.

The people of Saibai Is. are familiar with *P. papuanus*, know it as the 'Papuan Black Snake' and regard it as dangerous and abundant. There are no records of *B. marinus* on the island and, given the apparent decline of *P. papuanus* in Papua New Guinea, Saibai Is. may prove to be a stronghold for this species.

The discovery of *P. papuanus* on Saibai Is. adds to the Australian fauna another species of elapid snake known to have inflicted fatal bites or believed capable of doing so. Its congener, *P. australis*, occurs in Papua New Guinea and on Cape York Peninsula, and has recently been recorded on



FIG. 1. *Pseudechis papuanus* (QMJ 62555) from Saibai Is.

Prince Of Wales Island (QMJ62560) between them. To treat bites from both species, Black Snake Antivenom is available. It should be stocked at least in the Thursday Island Hospital and, probably, in the clinic on Saibai Is.

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